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Lafayette County Courthouse remains anchor of community

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By Errol Castens/NEMS Daily Journal

Editor's note: This is the eighth in a 16-part series about Northeast Mississippi courthouses.

OXFORD – The first Lafayette County Courthouse didn't live very long, but its successor has been immortalized.

After 50 acres in the heart of Oxford were donated for the county seat in 1837, the resulting grid of lots were sold to pay for the construction of the courthouse, which was occupied in 1840. That structure was burned in August 1864, along with most of the buildings on the Square, by the Union forces of Gen. A.J. "Whisky" Smith. The only known photograph of the original courthouse shows its grounds occupied with Yankee tents.

According to Oxford historian Jack Lamar Mayfield, author of “Images of America: Oxford and Ole Miss,” the present courthouse was built on the foundation of the original, being completed in 1870. Later, major changes to the building included a white stucco finish over its brick exterior in the 1920s or ’30s and additions built onto the east and west sides in the 1950s.

Throughout the life of Oxford and Lafayette County, the courthouse square has been an anchor of the community. Paving the surrounding streets in the ’20s improved its experience, as did the introduction of parking islands and one-way streets in the 1970s.

For decades the Square was also the center of commerce, offering both everyday items and luxuries – not to mention wagons and later pickups laden with fresh produce – to entice residents to shop. Many an older Oxonian can still remember the umbrella of Christmas lights that radiated from the courthouse clock tower to buildings around the Square.

Today, the hardware, grocery and five-and-dime stores have disappeared, but the Square is as busy as ever with folks patronizing its restaurants and boutiques, along with banks, law offices and the venerable Neilson’s Department Store. Its vitality is proved not only by the festivals, fundraisers, parades and political rallies it hosts, but also by the city’s determined efforts to address the shortage of downtown parking.

As with most judicial venues with any age on them, the Lafayette County Courthouse has been the site of human drama. One notorious incident involved William Faulkner’s maternal great-grandfather, Sheriff Charles Butler, who also acted as circuit court bailiff.

“He would stand out on the balcony of the courthouse and holler out the person’s name and tell them it was time for them to come to court,” Mayfield said. “Samuel Thompson, the editor of the Oxford Eagle, was a notorious town drunk, and he was sitting on a curb. When Butler started hollering for someone to come to court, he started hollering back, and it made the sheriff mad.

“Butler went down to confront him and ended up shooting him,” Mayfield added. “Later he was tried for it, but he got acquitted.”

In “William Faulkner and Southern History,” author Joel Williams noted that the killing may not have been as blatant as Thompson’s widow wrote in the newspaper. Thompson was a frequent source of trouble for local law enforcers.

Trials don’t often pack courtrooms these days, and many transactions of public business take place elsewhere, including online. Still, Oxford’s ordinance that requires nearby buildings to be shorter than the Lafayette County Courthouse is only one of many evidences that it continues as the community’s symbolic center.

William Faulkner made exactly that point when he beatified its fictional Yoknapatawpha County counterpart, in “Requiem for a Nun”:

“But above all, the courthouse: the center, the focus, the hub; sitting looming in the center of the county’s circumference like a single cloud in its ring of horizon, laying its vast shadow to the uttermost rim of horizon; musing, brooding, symbolic and ponderable, tall as cloud, solid as rock, dominating all: protector of the weak, judicate and curb of the passions and lusts, repository and guardian of the aspirations and hopes.”

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